



SCHOOL FOOD THE BASICS



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This support tool will give you all the background information you need to know about school food, how it's funded, what regulations control it and what impacts the food that children eat at school every day. This will also inform you on what is needed to support and drive change at both a local and national level.

SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS - HISTORY

President Harry S. Truman implemented the 1946 National School Lunch Act as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children”. In 1998, Congress expanded the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to include cash reimbursement for snacks served in certain after-school educational and enrichment programs.

The NSLP is part of the Child Nutrition Program (CNP), regulated under the Child Nutrition Act (CNA) and funded through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The CNP also funds programs for school breakfasts, after-school snacks and a summer meal program for children lacking a healthy diet. The School Breakfast Program was established by Congress as a pilot in 1966 and became a permanent program in 1975.

All schools that participate in these programs are required to offer free and reduced-price meals to low-income children, adhere to federal nutrition standards, and to implement wellness policies that promote healthy school environments. Although the CNA has permanent authorization, it is reauthorized on a rolling basis every five years, giving Congress the opportunity to review and amend it. The last reauthorization was in 2010 when the CNA was reauthorized under a new name, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Changes to both nutritional standards and funding were included in this.



HOW IS SCHOOL LUNCH FUNDED?

School lunch is paid for through the NSLP, a federally funded program of the USDA. The cost of the NSLP in 2010 was \$10.8 billion. In addition, the USDA buys billions of dollars of commodity foods (unprocessed or partially processed foods) to provide schools, participating in the National School Lunch Program, with access to low-cost ingredients.

In public schools, meals are paid for by students either at full price, or through the free/reduced-price meal program of NSLP. Any child at a school participating in the NSLP may purchase a meal. Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents.

In the 2011-2012 school year the federal reimbursement rates were 26 cents for each full-price meal, \$2.37 for reduced-price meal and \$2.77 for each free meal. Schools in which 60% or more of the lunches in the second preceding school year were served free or reduced price received an additional 2 cents reimbursement for each free, reduced-price, or paid meal served. Reimbursement amounts are increased annually to account for inflation, at the rate of around 4 cents per child.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM?

- ★ Nearly 32 million kids in 101,600 public and non-profit private schools and residential childcare facilities get their lunch through the program.
- ★ 11 million children participate in the breakfast program.
- ★ Over 20 million children participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program.



ARE THERE REGULATIONS AND NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCH?

In order for schools to be reimbursed for meals, those meals must adhere to USDA regulations and meet specific standards also outlined by the USDA. Under the regulations, five key meal components must be served (meat/meat alternate, fruit, vegetables, grains and fluid milk (250ml/8oz). Details about what counts towards these credits are described in detail on the USDA website.

Starting in the 2012-2013 school year, schools must implement new USDA school meal standards, based on 2009 recommendations from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) – School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children. Published on January 26 2012, the Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program (77 FR 4088) is effective from July 1 2012, with certain standards phased in over time (more details below). Schools must comply with these standards in order to receive the 6 cent boost in the federal reimbursement rate that Congress has allotted for implementing them. Many schools will need help to achieve full implementation, but it is also worth remembering that schools can always go above and beyond these guidelines too.

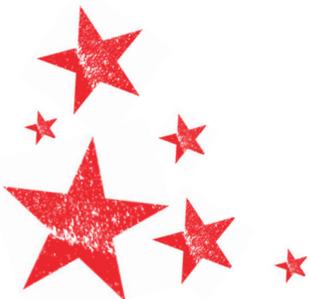
The new school lunch standards include:

★ New age/grade groups for SBP/NSLP

Grades k-5, 6-8, 9-12 will be categorized separately for meal requirements. These changes will come into play for the SBP from the school year 2013-2014 and for the NSLP in the school year 2012-2013.

★ More fresh fruit and vegetables

As part of the new rule, fruit and vegetables must be categorized separately and the amount of each served in schools will be doubled.



ARE THERE REGULATIONS AND NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCH?

Fruit

A daily serving of each must be provided at breakfast and lunch. A selection can be made from fresh or frozen fruit without added sugar, canned fruit in juice/light syrup or dried fruit. No more than half of the fruit offered can be in the form of juice (which must be 100% juice). Only at breakfast can vegetables be offered in place of fruits.

Vegetables

Vegetables must be served daily at lunch with a variety of vegetables served over the week (including dark green, red/orange, beans/peas, starchy). Vegetables can be fresh, frozen or canned, and foods from the beans/peas (legumes) subgroup may be credited as a vegetable OR a meat alternative.

More wholegrains

Wholegrains must be offered at breakfast and lunch. The wholegrains requirement will be phased in over the next two years – initially, at least half of all grains offered at lunch will be wholegrain. By the start of the 2014-2015 academic year, all grains offered at lunch will be wholegrain.

Reduced or 0% fat milk options

Fluid milk options must be fat-free (for flavored or unflavored milk), low in fat (for unflavored milk only) or fat-free or low in fat (for lactose-reduced or lactose-free milk). Schools must offer at least two of these choices.

Food items that are less processed, lower in salt, fat and calories

For the first time, portion sizes will be measured in terms of the amount of calories they contain – based on the age of the child, servings will be subject to a recommended calorie allowance. In addition, saturated fat will be limited to less than 10% of total calories and a limit on sodium will be put in place. There will also be new restrictions on trans-fat, which will be reduced to 0g per serving. As part of the effort to reduce the sodium content in school breakfasts and lunches, technical assistance and training resources will be available to schools. USDA is also reducing sodium content in the foods that it provides schools.



THE NEW SCHOOL MEAL STANDARDS

	SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM	NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM
Changes Effective SY 2012-2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer only fat-free (flavored or unflavored) and low-fat (unflavored) milk • Saturated fat limit <10% calories per meal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer fruit daily • Offer vegetables subgroups weekly • Half of grains must be wholegrain rich • Offer weekly grain ranges • Offer weekly meat/meat alternate ranges • Offer only fat-free (flavored or unflavored) and low-fat (unflavored) milk • Portions subject to maximum and minimum calorie allowance • Saturated fat limit <10% calories per meal • 0g of trans-fat per portion • A single Food-Based Menu Planning approach • Establish age/grade groups: K-5, 8-8 and 9-12 • Reimbursable meals must contain a fruit or a vegetable • State agencies must conduct a nutritional analysis overview of one week of menus



THE NEW SCHOOL MEAL STANDARDS

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Changes Effective SY 2013-2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half of grains must be wholegrain rich • Offer weekly grain ranges • Minimum and maximum calorie ranges • 0g of trans-fat per portion • A single Food-Based Menu Planning approach • Establish age/grade groups: K-5, 8-8 and 9-12 • 3-year administrative review cycle • State agencies must conduct a nutritional analysis overview of one week of menus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-year administrative review cycle
Changes Effective SY 2014-2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruit quantity to increase to 5 cups per week (minimum 1 cup/day) • All grains must be wholegrain rich • Target 1 for average weekly sodium limit • Reimbursable meals must contain a fruit or a vegetable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All grains must be wholegrain rich • Target 1 for average weekly sodium limit
Changes Effective SY 2017-2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target 2 sodium restriction (evaluate studies on sodium intake and human health to be done before this phase) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target 2 sodium restriction (evaluate studies on sodium intake and human health to be done before this phase)
Changes Effective SY 2022-2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final target sodium restriction (evaluate studies on sodium intake and human health to be done before this phase) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final target sodium restriction (evaluate studies on sodium intake and human health to be done before this phase)



While the new school meal standards mean that school food quality and nutrition will improve over the coming years, it will take time to implement them, and it will require help and support from all parties. In addition, there are other challenges to ensuring that all students are getting a balanced meal at school.

'OFFER VERSUS SERVE' RULE

Schools must offer the full meal, but students can choose to refuse up to two items. This can create an imbalanced meal. Students may also take smaller portions under the “offer versus serve” rule.

COMPETITIVE FOODS – SNACK FOODS AND BEVERAGES

In 2013, nutritional standards for foods and snacks sold outside of the NSLP were updated nationally for the first time since 1979, as part of the 2010 Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act. These foods, known as “competitive foods”, include items sold in vending machines, school stores and à la carte lines. These new standards will come into play during the 2014/2015 school year and will require that snacks are reasonable, child-sized portions, fewer than 200 calories and low in fat, sodium and sugar. The minimum standard requires that these foods fit into the category of fruit, vegetable, protein, dairy or wholegrain.

Many schools are already way ahead of these standards and have strict policies surrounding the food and drinks available outside of the breakfast and lunch programs, while others still have big changes to make. Find out what the snack policy is at your school and get more information on the new regulations [here](#).

FOODS OF MINIMAL NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Federal regulations define “foods of minimal nutritional value” (FMNV) as a category of items that provide less than 5% of the U.S. Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for each of the eight essential nutrients, per serving. These foods include chewing gum, coated popcorn and certain candies made largely from sweeteners, such as hard candy and jelly beans. These foods must not be sold on campus during mealtimes, but may be sold at any other time during the day.

Once the new rule for competitive foods comes into effect, the USDA’s nutritional requirements will essentially remove the ability to sell FMNV in schools.



WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO SUPPORT THE CHANGES TO SCHOOL LUNCH?

At the local level:

- ★ **Parent advocacy and commitment**
- ★ **Administrative and school-wide support**
- ★ **Financial resources**

At the national level:

★ **Training**

Training for nutrition services staff is provided through a program led by the USDA called Team Nutrition. Training covers nutritional education, meal planning, and finance. There is no federally funded program for teaching school food service staff how to cook.

★ **Equipment**

Cafeterias across America will need equipment in order to be able to prepare fresh meals on site. Districts could refurbish just one cafeteria to serve as a central kitchen for all their schools. The necessary equipment includes stoves, sinks, and cooking utensils, as well as proper storage facilities, such as walk-in refrigerators.

★ **Eligibility**

Wider eligibility for free and reduced meal participation would increase participation in the school meal program and assist more children in need. The poverty level should take into account local cost of living, and should be updated significantly. The applications should be available online and the printed applications should be simplified so that families are able to enroll quickly and easily.

★ **State initiatives**

Several states have introduced their own, additional legislation covering things like snack and soda taxes, calorie labelling on menus, higher nutritional standards, regulation of competitive foods and Farm to School programs. Find out more about state policy options [here](#).

★ **Funding**

Each school meal costs approximately \$2.92-\$3.10 to produce, with a shortfall estimated by the School Nutrition Association at 35-45 cents per meal. It would cost federal government an additional \$1.7 billion to cover this shortfall. As it stands, the onus is on the schools or states to fund the balance. Legislation has allocated an additional \$450 million annually to school lunch, one-third of which would go towards the actual meal, allowing 6 cents more per plate per child for schools that comply with the new meal standards.



This information was adapted from materials published by: Center for Science in the Public Interest (www.cspinet.org) and The Chez Panisse Foundation (www.chezpanissefoundation.org), the USDA (<http://www.fns.usda.gov>) and the Food Research and Action Center (www.frac.org).

OTHER RESOURCES

USDA – Final Rule: Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/legislation/nutritionstandards.htm>

IOM-School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children: <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/School-Meals-Building-Blocks-for-Healthy-Children.aspx>

Find out more about snacks served in schools and updates to their nutritional regulations in the three partner toolkits [here](#).

